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Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta

The Discourse on Answering Questions | A 4.42
 Theme: The 4 ways of answering questions
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2014

1 Introduction

1.1 The Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta (A 4.42) simply lists the 4 ways of answering questions [§1], closing with a set of 4 verses [§§2-5]. As such, it is the shortest of all the suttas dealing with this well known topic.

1.2 The 4 ways of answering a question (or not answering them) are skills that a Dharma teacher, or anyone speaking the Dharma should master. A teacher, counsellor, discussant or speaker should be skilled in knowing:

- (1) when to answer “yes or no” to a categorical question, or
- (2) to give a detailed answer to an analytical question, or
- (3) to counter-question (when the question is unclear or to help the questioner discover the answer personally), or
- (4) not to respond to a question that is “wrongly put,” to prevent misunderstanding, and asserts that a trick question and a question with no spiritual benefit are one and the same.

Such a person, skilled in the 4 ways of answering a question, would be able to give us helpful teaching and guidance when approached, and they are worth approaching or listening to.

A more detailed study of the ways of answering a question is found in **the Kathāvatthu Sutta** (A 3.67) and its Introduction (SD 46.11) [2.1].

2 Related suttas

2.1 The Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta should be studied with **the Kathāvatthu Sutta** (A 3.67), which presents the 4 ways of answering questions¹ in the context of other qualities in connection with teachings and learning the Dharma. The Sutta (A 3.67) also gives two sets of principles for discourse, two sets of points of decorum during discourse, and attentiveness during a discussion. A 3.67 also closes with a set of verses.²

2.2 THE 4 GREAT REFERENCES

2.2.1 The Saṅgīti Sutta. The 4 analytic skills are also listed in **the Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33). Its commentary cross-refers *pañha,vyākaraṇa* to “the talk [teaching] on the great references” (*mahā’padesa,kathā*) (DA 3:1023), without any elaboration. Hence, we must take *mahā,padesa,kathā* here as a synonym for *pañha,vyākaraṇa*. We should also note, in passing, that the term *mahā;padesa* also refers to two other sets of teachings, one in the Sutta Piṭaka and the other in the Vinaya [2.2.2+2.2.3].

¹ For details of each of the 4 ways of answering questions, see SD 46.11 (2.2).

² **Kathāvatthu S** (A 3.67/1:197-199), SD 46.11.

2.2.2 Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta. The sutta version of *mahā’padesa*, found in **the Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16),³ is a set of factors dealing with the 4 means of authenticating the Buddha’s teachings as an oral tradition. If someone (eg an elder monastic) claims to have heard or received a teaching:

- (1) from the Blessed One’s own mouth; or
- (2) from a community [sangha] with elders, with distinguished teachers;⁴ or
- (3) from many elder monks who are well learned, masters of scripture, Dharma-experts, Vinaya-experts, experts in the Summaries [Matrices];⁵ or
- (4) from an elder monk who is well learned, master of scripture, Dharma-expert, Vinaya-expert, expert in the Summaries [Matrices]⁶—

“Then, bhikshus, you should neither approve nor disapprove of his word.

Neither approving nor disapproving, his words and syllables (*pada,vyañjanāni*) should be carefully studied and checked against (*otāretabbāni*) the Sutta⁷ [Teaching] and examined (for conformity) (*sandassetabbāni*) against the Vinaya [Discipline].

If, upon such checking [collating] and examining,

they are found to conform neither to the Sutta nor to the Vinaya,

then it should be concluded: ‘Surely, this is not the Blessed One’s word.

It has been wrongly understood by this monk,’ and the matter is to be rejected.

But where, upon such checking [collating] and examining,

they are found to conform to the Sutta and the Vinaya,

then it should be concluded, ‘Surely, this is the Blessed One’s word.

It has been rightly understood by this elder.’

(D 16,4.7-11/2:123 f), SD 9

There is no other *mahā’padesa* set nor any *mahā’padesa,kathā* in the Dīgha Nikāya.

2.2.3 The Vinaya. The Mahā,vagga of **the Vinaya**, however, has its own, probably older, “4 great references” (*mahā’padesa*) comprising 4 criteria for judging the propriety of an act or situation that is not covered by current rules:

- (1) Whatever has not been ruled as not allowable,
if it fits in with what is not allowable (*akappiya*) and goes against what is allowable,
that is not allowable.
- (2) Whatever has not been ruled as not allowable,
if it fits in with what is allowable (*kappiya*) but goes against what is not allowable,
that is allowable.
- (3) Whatever has not been ruled as not allowable,
if it fits in with what is not allowable and goes against what is allowable,
that is not allowable.

³ D 16,4-11/2:124 f + SD 9 (11). See also DA 2:565.

⁴ *Saṅgho...sa-t,thero sa,pāmokkho*.

⁵ *Sambahulā therā bhikkhū...bahussutā āgat’āgamā dhamma,dharā vinaya,dharā mātikā,dharā*.

⁶ *Eko thero bhikkhū...bahussuto āgat’āgamo dhamma,dharo vinaya,dharo mātikā,dharo*.

⁷ “Checked against the Sutta,” *sutte otaranti*, lit “they descend into the Sutta.” This unusual expression is “best interpreted in the light of the *Peṭakōpadesa* tradition where *otaraṇā* is one of the sixteen *hāras*” [Peṭk 11, 98-101, 157 etc; Nett 21 f, 63-70, 107; Nett:Ñ xl, 1, 37 n125/1] (Cousins 1983:3). Cf Jaini (ed), *Abhidharma,dīpa*, Patna, 1977: Intro p27 on Nett.

- (4) *Whatever has not been ruled as not allowable,*
 if it fits in with what is allowable
 that is allowable. and goes against what is not allowable,
 (Mv 6.40.3 @ V 1:250)⁸

There is no other *mahā'padesa* set nor any *mahā'padesa, kathā* in the Vinaya.

2.2.4 Overview. The only thing these 3 sets of factors have in common is that they share the name of *mahā'padesa*, “the great reference(s).” The first set—found in the Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta—deals with the proper ways of answering questions. The second set—found in the Dīgha—is about authenticating the Buddha’s teaching. And the third set—found in the Vinaya—deals with standards for deciding whether a certain disciplinary situation is allowable or not in accordance with the Vinaya.

Hence, these 3 sets are all “references” or standards in their own right, and serve as vital guidelines for quality control, so to speak, of the Dharma and Vinaya.

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Pañha Vyākaraṇa Sutta

The Discourse on Answering Questions

A 4.42

1 There are, bhikshus, 4 ways of answering questions. What are the four?

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| (1) There are, bhikshus, questions to be | answered categorically (yes or no). | <i>ekaṃsa, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (2) There are, bhikshus, questions to be | answered analytically [in detail]. | <i>vibhajja, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (3) There are, bhikshus, questions that | need a counter-question. | <i>paṭipucchā, vyākaraṇīya</i> |
| (4) There are, bhikshus, questions | to be set aside [left unanswered]. | <i>ṭhapanīya</i> |

These, bhikshus, are the 4 ways of answering questions.

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| 2 <i>Ekaṃsa, vacanaṃ ekaṃ
vibhajja, vacanā, paraṃ
tatiyaṃ paṭipuccheyya
catutthaṃ pana ṭhāpaye</i> | One has a fully certain voice (yes or no),
another, a voice that has analysed,
a third would question in return,
but a fourth is set aside. |
| 3 <i>Yo ca tesam⁹ tattha tattha
jānāti anudhammataṃ
catu, pañhassa kusalo
āhu bhikkhuṃ tathā, vidhaṃ</i> | But these (answers) to this and that who
knows according to the Dharma, true teaching—
one skilled in the 4 kinds of questions—
such a monk he truly is. |

⁸ See SD 9 (11.2).

⁹ Ee; Ce Ke Se *nesaṃ*.

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| <p>4 <i>Durāsado</i>¹⁰ <i>duppasaho</i>¹¹
 <i>gambhīro duppadhamsiyo</i>
 <i>atho atthe anathe ca</i>
 <i>ubhayassa hoti kovido</i>¹²</p> | <p>One hard to attack, hard to overcome,
 profound, hard to assail.
 Further, in what is beneficial and what is not,
 in both he is adept.</p> |
| <p>5 <i>Anattham parivajjeti</i>
 <i>attham gaṇhāti paṇḍito</i>
 <i>atthābhisamayā dhīro</i>
 <i>paṇḍito'ti pavuccatīti</i></p> | <p>He avoids the harmful,
 he grasps the beneficial: he is wise.
 Steadfast in realizing what is beneficial,
 he is said to be wise.</p> |

— evaṃ —

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¹⁰ *Dur-āsada* (J 6:272,10') = *dur*, "difficult" + *āsada*, "(to) approach, attack" (J 5:336,20*).

¹¹ *Du-ppasaha* = *du*, "difficult" + *pasaha*, "(to) overcome" (D 3:79,29; A 2:46,15*).

¹² Ce Ee; Ke Se *ubhay'atthassa kovido*.